New York Theatre Critics' Reviews *1946*

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"Made in Heaven"

New York Post

OCTOBER 25, 1946

Wives and Husbands Battle In Hagar Wilde's Comedy

By Richard Watts Jr.

Although she lacks the vitriolic scorn for her own sex that Clare Boothe used to get into her plays, Hagar Wilde casts quite a sardonic eye on the conduct of women in matrimony in her new comedy, "Made in Heaven." It is Miss Wilde's suggestion that the institution of marriage, being more of a brawl than a companionship of love and confidence, has a way of bringing out the worst in people, but is probably here to stay. She would, however, be more sanguine about its future if the wives would be have less petulantly.

It is certainly not her intention to acquit the husbands of all responsibility for the Thurber-like war between men and women that she sees as modern marriage. They are, she feels, inclined to be dolts, clowns and romantic idiots and to act in the manner of spoiled children.

Their sins though, are but minor, compared to the endless and unreasonable nagging indulged in by the wives and even by the girl on the verge of becoming a bride, as they are contemplated in "Made in Heaven." In fact, of the five women studied by the playwright, the only two not given to excessive bickering are an unmarried girl of questionable morals and a wife who floats about in an amiable alcoholic haze.

Amusement and Scorn

Having a keen eye and a lively sense of humor, Miss Wilde looks upon her brawling couples with amusement as well as scorn, and she has written scenes and speeches that have a nice comic bite about them. The only trouble is that the play emerges as a series of sparring contests and has a way of resembling one of those comic strips dealing with domestic battles rather than a satisfying comedy on the subject.

There are so many bright lines and humorously sage observations in "Made in Heaven" that my eventual dissatisfaction with it struck me with a particular sense of regret. What happens is that not only do the repeated brawls between the husband and wife, who are its central figures, become monotonous and a bit tiresome, but the wife herself, ends by being one of the least likeable characters of the season. When, for the final curtain, the couple are reunited, you are inclined to suspect that it comes under the head of an unhappy ending. But you hardly feel that the reconciliation is going to last.

Handicap

By making the husband a completely sympathetic character and the wife an exceptionally annoying one, Miss Wilde has not only handicapped her play by causing the contest between them to be uneven, but has made the task of her leading actress excessive. The result is that Donald Cook, an actor of skill and experience, is able to make the hero ingratiating and charming, while Carmen Mathews, a player of considerable less experience and resource, must fight an uphill struggle to keep the heroine at all bearable.

As the dubious wife's sister, who starts her nagging on the eve of matrimony, Katharine Bard manages the not inconsiderable feat of being believable and rather engaging. There are several other good performances. Lawrence Fletcher is particularly expert as an especially unfortunate husband, Louis Borel is of much help as an understanding foreigner, and Ann Thomas again plays her familiar role of a bad-girl-with-heart-of-gold with her usual effectiveness. Lawrence Goldwasser's sets also deserve a word of praise.

For all its frequent brightness and humor, "Made in Heaven" is not the comedy Miss Wilde's unquestioned talents keep leading one to expect of her.

MADE IN HEAVEN.'

Play by Hagar Wilde; staged by Martin Manulis; settings by Lawrence Goldwasser; presented by John Golden at Henry Miller's Theater Thursday evening, October 24, 1946. The cast:

Nancy Tennant	Katharine Bard
Marion Hunt	Sarah Burton
Lazslo Vertes	Louis Borel
Philip Dunlap	Tony Bickley
Elsa Meredith	Carmen Mathews
Zachary Meredith	Donald Cook
Harry Hunt	Lawrence Fletcher
Dorothy	Marrian Walters
Miss Crowder	Jane Middleton
Hank	Maurice Manson
Man at bar	Willard L. Thompson
June	Ann Thomas

SYNOPSIS: Act I. Scene 1. Living room of the Zachary Merediths, within easy commuting distance of New York—11:30 Sunday evening. Scene 2. The same, 5 o'clock the following afternoon. Act II. Scene 1. Zachary's office in New York, a half hour later. Scene 2. The bar in the Hotel Revere, a few minutes later. Scene 3. A room in the Hotel Revere, immediately afterward. Act III. The Merediths' living room, noon of the next day.

New York World-Telegram

OCTOBER 25, 1946

'Made in Heaven!' A Marital Mixup

By WILLIAM HAWKINS.

One of the reasons John Golden's new production, "Made In Heaven!" gets so many laughs from an audience is that there is practically not an original moment in it. That may seem contradictory, but the fact is that most of the outbursts are of recognition.

During the best sequences of the comedy there is not an idea expressed that you have not thought, heard or said yourself.

The play concerns some people who are, most of them, of average disposition. If you can keep laughing, and the chances are you will, there will not be time to stop and think how shockingly bad-tempered their behavior is. It gives you a rather superior feeling.

Verge of a Divorce.

"Made In Heaven!" is not about a divorce but the verge of one, the theory being that while it lasts, a miss is as good as a mile.

Some sharp lines, high acting and vivacious direction make the show fun to sit through.

It all starts at the end of a Sunday night party in the country. The guests have left and Elsa Meredith would like to sit around and talk to her husband. Zachary is tired and wants to go to bed.

With as simple a springboard as that, the bickering leads to Zachary's departure from home. There are the quick fumbles, for pride's sake, after other romances. There are the friends with advice. And there are further misunderstandings.

There is a subplot of the wife's sister and her own marital plans, which get little promise of perfection from what she sees. And there is the moment when emotion and habit overcome temper.

Not a Grown-Up Claudia.

"Made In Heaven!" is by no means a grown-up "Claudia." It has neither the warmth nor the depth. It has a scene that goes Marx Brothers with innumerable entrances and exits. It has a third act that proves how difficult it is to stretch a slender story into a full-length play.

It is often artificial, usually obvious and seldom original. And in spite of all that it is extremely funny.

Donald Cook, starred as the husband, makes this Zachary a thorough-going commuter. He has a way of never letting a line lie, but projects his reaction with looks or gestures that leave no doubt in your mind about what is going on in his.

Night of Bachelorhood.

Particularly amusing are his phone conversations when on his one night of bachelorhood he can get no one to dine with him.

Carmen Mathews, playing his wife, Elsa, does an excellent job of keeping her feminine without becoming any more outright a nag than any girl might be when she gets bored with domesticity. She does a delightful drunk scene.

Louis Borel is suave and understanding as the "foreigner" friend who tries his best to keep the marriage off the rocks.

Sceptical Sister.

As Elsa's sceptical young sister, Katharine Bard is charmingly impertinent, and Tony Bickley makes her a forceful, young, manly beau.

Some of the play's best lines go to Lawrence Fletcher, who contributes a knowing job as the friend who just plain hates his wife. Sarah Burton is the officious suburban viper who is the object of his disaffection.

Ann Thomas resists the temptation to make a flusie of the discontented barfly who causes Zach's supreme trouble. And Marrian Walters puts cynical comedy into her lesson of how to be a wife who is happy though hungover.

NEW YORK Herald Tribune

OCTOBER 25, 1946

= By HOWARD BARNES =

Marital Merry-Go-Round

WEDLOCK is given a once over lightly in "Made in Heaven!" The institution is contemplated with jaundiced jocularity at Henry Miller's Thater. Hagar Wilde has put her finger on several stock situations in a marital merry-go-round. She has enlivened them with easily recognizable characters and a rapid fire of wry quips. With Donald Cook and his assistants making the most of her play, it manages to be intermittently amusing, but it has all the qualities of an elongated revue skit with a succession of blackouts.

* * *

The author is at her best when she is dealing with the peripheral nonsense of the war between the sexes. In a summer try-out the work was known as "It's a Man's World," a title which better conveys the satirical and farcical nature of the piece. Not that Miss Wilde saves her best barbs for husbands and suitors. She is remarkably impartial in her travesty, cooking up a quarrel out of nothing, going into a bar and a hotel bedroom for quick takes on the estrangement and resolving the flurry as neatly as it is generally accomplished in a scenario. What the farce lacks is wit and the touches of profundity that might have made it genuinely funny.

* * *

Cook is remarkably adept at catching up the fragments of the burlesque and giving them sustained merriment. Whether he is being hen-pecked out of his house, or becoming haplessly involved with a complaisant stray, he keeps the accent of caricature reasonably toned down. There is a flippant assurance about his portrayal which makes it something more than a series of animated comic cartoons. If he is little more successful than the other members of the company in creating a springboard for jesting, it is because there is no opportunity to anchor the springboard.

The trollop of Ann Thomas is conventional, but lusty and there are excellent bits by Lawrence Fletcher, as a husband who damn well knows that marriage wasn't made where the old saw would have it, and by Miriann Walters in the part of an alcoholic matron who wants someone around to cure her of the hiccups. Carmen Meredith plays the principal wife with considerably too much exaggeration. Katharine Bard and Tony Bickley are more ornamental than persuasive as youngsters about to imitate the foolishness of their elders. Martin Manulis has staged the piece briskly against fast-changing sets by Lawrence Goldwasser as befits a mammoth skit. "Made in Heaven!" is smart and superficially diverting.

The New York Times

OCTOBER 25, 1946

THE PLAY

By BROOKS ATKINSON

Nearly everyone in Henry Miller's Theatre last evening seemed vocally sure that the first comedy of the season had arrived, for nearly everyone was either laughing or guffawing. "Made In Heaven!" is the title; Hagar Wilde dramatized it from a short story of her own authorship. It is a machine-made comedy about the battle of the sexes just one step removed from the "mama-love-papa?" school of cartooning. Donald Cook is starring in it as the advertising executive who cannot endure his wife in the first act and cannot live without her at the final curtain.

To people who regard "O Mistress Mine," as a dynamo of wit, "Made In Heaven!" will probably seem like a pretty funny comic strip in the smart style of expensive Broadway producing. But for the record this department is bound to report that it found Miss Wilde's comedy mechanical and humorless. Although the war between the sexes is no doubt the funniest subject in the world, Miss Wilde is not its most inventive war correspondent.

* * *

She is writing about the elegant squalor of the upper-middle classes who quarrel in the suburbs. Toward 11:30 on a Sunday evening Zachary Meredith and his wife are easing out the last drunks and philanderers from a black-tie party, and they polish off the first act with a thunderous quarrel. The rest of "Made in Heaven!" chronicles Zachary's forlorn attempts to escape from loneliness after he has taken up separate lodgings in a hotel in town, and his return to his wife in the last act in obedience to an old habit.

There is a kind of secondary theme to this escapade about the normal horrors of home-life. Although Zachary's young sister-in-law is very much in love with a certain party, she is terrified by what happens to married people and refuses to be married. Although all the married people in the play live extremely miserable lives, they are united in trying to get the young folks married.

* * *

If Miss Wilde were a wit, this topsy-turvy logic might be a very amusing commentary on the malevolence of the sexes. But she has very little to contribute to the theme except hair-pulling, screaming, dipsomania and double-takes in the dialogue. "Made In Heaven!" is the sort of ready-made gibe in which "I have to go to Philadelphia tomorrow" turns out to be a hilarious joke.

* * *

Under the galloping direction of Martin Manulis, all the actors are fashionably dressed and usually in a hurry. Mr. Cook, a personable actor, whose clothes fit him admirably, plays the part of the bad-tempered husband impeccably; and Carmen Mathews plays the peevish wife with a good deal of spirit. Katharine Bard bestows her personal charm on the metallic part of a young cynic who does not dare to entrust love to marriage.

As a worldly European who knows more about marriage than barbaric Americans do, Louis Borel is giving a pleasant performance. Lawrence Fletcher has an amusing tempo to contribute to the ponderous part of a man afflicted with both sinus and marriage. Sarah Burton and Marrian Walters give acceptable performances as minor harpies in the cast, and Ann Thomas has an entertaining way of portraying the vulgarity of a hotel tramp. As scene designer, Lawrence Goldwasser has supplied some gleaming office furniture, bar fixtures and hotel bedroom appointments.

Nearly everyone in the first-night audience seemed to regard Miss Wilde's hocus-pocus as devastatingly funny. Exception!—apparently overruled by the audience.

The Sun

OCTOBER 25, 1946

'Made in Heaven,' Put On by John Golden, a Labored and Sprawling Comedy.

By WARD MOREHOUSE.

There's some slick dialogue wasted in the comedy about matrimony called "Made in Heaven," which opened last evening at Henry Miller's. John Golden, senior showman of the town, makes the presentation. He saw the play in a straw-hat presentation, liked it, and begins his season with it in 43d street.

Hagar Wilde is the author. Her facility with flip speech far exceeds her talent for characterization and construction. "Made in Heaven" crackles occasionally through the sheer glibness of the lines, but for the greater part of the evening it is a sprawling and labored comedy. And the production is of scant help to play or playwright.

There has been no squandering of money on the settings designed by Lawrence Goldwasser. The scenery gives the appearance of having come direct from the summer theater circuit or from some old theatrical warehouse in Fort Lee, N. J., and done over in a great hurry. A more expert production, with better performances here and there, would have been of enormous aid to Miss Wilde's scanty story.

It is a story of modern marriage in general, and specifically of the marriage of Zachary and Elsa Meredith, who have been together ten years. He bolts their suburban home following an after-a-party squabble, pretty fed up and all that. She goes after him, and in a mood for reconciliation, but finds a girl in his hotel room. That's enough to put her to packing for Reno. But when Zach returns it's quite enough to put them into each other's arms again.

There are some nice performances and others that are not so good in the Miller's new comedy. Donald Cook, in his brisk, explosive, jumpy fashion, does a lot for his scenes. Katharine Bard is excellent as a sensitive, outspoken girl, who longs for marriage but is sharply critical of the entire institution. Lawrence Fletcher and Ann Thomas, reliable players, get some fun into secondary roles. Jane Middleton is attractive in a bit, a mere walk-on. But Carmen Mathews, quite miscast, has a rather distressing time as the ten-year wife of the high-powered advertising executive. Martin Manulis has directed.

Matrimony takes a beating throughout most of the evening at Henry Miller's, but it is a winner at the final curtain. The play isn't. For all its crisp speech, "Made in Heaven" is a hobbling and flagging comedy. And in the final act Miss Wilde runs out of play completely.

DAILY NEWS

OCTOBER 25, 1946.

'Made in Heaven' a Pleasant but Routine Wife vs. Husband Comedy

By JOHN CHAPMAN

George McManus and John Golden are brothers under the skin. George draws comic strips about Jiggs and Maggie and John produces plays about them. The plot has not changed in the 34 years that George has been drawing or in the 26 years since John produced the late Frank Craven's "The First Year." The story is simply this: a husband loves his wife and the wife loves her husband so much that they fight all the time.

Mr. Golden's latest dramatization of the war between the sexes, "Made in Heaven," was presented last evening at Henry Miller's Theatre. It is a very good sample of the domestic comedy, for it had even the first-nighters, a notoriously nasty clan, laughing at each other. The women were laughing at the men and the men were laughing at the women, so I suppose the play will be catering to the family trade for the rest of the season.

Round and Round We Go.

The author of "Made in Heaven" is Miss Hagar Wilde. Miss Wilde has taken the simple and inevitable ingredients of a domestic comedy—a husband and a wife who are having one more tiff after 10 years of tiffing—and put them through the regular routine of misunderstandings, which include an Other Woman for the man and an Other Man for the woman. Her greatest innovation in this field of box-office clover is her apparently deliberate and therefore inspired omission of the comedy servant.

Miss Wilde's lines are quite bright and pleasant and so are her characters. Some of her barroom conversation, the time the husband goes to a hotel to get drunk and becomes friendly with an amiable broad, makes me think that somewhere she has read a fine nonsensical sketch by the late Ring Lardner titled "The Tridget of Greva."

Pleasant, too, are the players, who include Donald Cook as the husband and Carmen Mathews as the wife. They manage to stay mad at each other until it is time for the audience to go home, which is all the suspense a domestic comedy needs. The others in the company include Katharine Bard and Tony Bickley as a pair of young lovers who have begun to fight even before the wedding, Lawrence Fletcher and Sarah Burton as a pair who have been married for some time, Ann Thomas as the amiable broad and Louis Borel as a man who is polite because, being a foreigner, he doesn't know any better.

Martin Manulis has directed the play and Lawrence Goldwasser has made the suburban and hotel settings.

Journal American

OCTOBER 25, 1946

'Made in Heaven' At Henry Miller's

By ROBERT GARLAND

There are times at Henry Miller's Theatre when you wish that "Made in Heaven" would live up to its own wisecracks. A time or so too many for its own good. I would not be surprised. But there is no denying that much of the on-stage talk is brilliant. And, when not exactly brilliant, clever. Only infrequently does it outsmart itself. Then not for long. Conversational scintillation soon sets in again.

This "Made in Heaven," this starring vehicle for Donald Cook, this first attraction of the new John Golden season, this comedy by Hagar Wilde, this last night's opening in the theatre built by Gilbert Miller's father, this—well, this is the comedy you could have seen last Summer at the Westport Country Playhouse. There, it was "It's a Man's World." There it was very, very promising.

It still is very, very promising. For Hagar Wilde, along with the Oscar whose "Lady Windermere's Fan" is at the Cort, knows a neat phrase when she turns one. And, again like the other Wilde whose comedy is five blocks to the north, she is not always successful when fashioning a thread of plot on which to string her phrases. "Made in Heaven" might just as well be "Elsa Meredith's Man."

* * *

'Yes' or 'No'?

Elsa Meredith's man goes by the name of Zachary. And when "Made in Heaven" gets under way in Lawrence Goldwasser's cushy living-room, the Mereditha—Elsa and Zach are man-and-wife of 10 years standing—are working their way into a quarrel. They agree to disagree. And, 18 hours later and still in that elegant interior, they are still at it. Then, exit Zachary!

The Mereditha have friends and friends. Most of them are married. All of them are discontented. Discontented, too, are Nancy Tennant, Elsa's younger sister, and Philip Dunlap, who wants to make a matron out of her. But Nancy shilly-shallies. With that cushy living-room full of bad examples, with that elegant interior overrun with marriages made in Hades, Nancy says neither "Yes" nor "No."

To keep the story going, Zachary walks out on Elsa, Nancy walks out on Philip. Followed by friends, acquaintances and neighbors, they move from living-room to office, to bar, to bedroom, then to the Meredith's once more. There, play, players and playgoers are exactly where they started. It is mannered and made-to-order. But there are wonderful wisecracks ever and anon.

* * *

Laughs Galore

To report that Donald Cook makes most of them is to lean toward under-statement. He, too, can be mannered and made-to-order.

But, when not forcing the wisecracks to sound wiser and more cracky than the playwright obviously intended, he is a Cowardian comedian to bring forgiveness to the most unforgiving soldier boy in Brooklyn. Mr. Cook has style, pace, technical perfection.

The supporting players enlisted by Mr. Golden and put through their paces by Martin Manulis could not be bettered. Especially Carmen Mathews as Elsa, Marrian Walters as Dorothy, Ann Thomas as June, Louis Borel as Laszlo, Tony Bickley as Philip and Lawrence Fletcher as Harry. Even Katharine Bard, as the yes-and-no Nancy, enriches a character that would be unbearable without her.

Along with me, people took their fun when and where they found it in last night's "Made in Heaven." And the laughter was long, loud and generally spontaneous. So long, so loud, so generally spontaneous was the merriment that the creaking of basic story-telling went practically unnoticed. Husband got wife, husband lost wife and husband got wife back again in the presence of a not too critical congregation...

There are laughs at Henry Miller's. And quite a lot of them!

PM

OCTOBER 27, 1946

—*Kronenberger*—

Anything to Get a Laugh

PM Reviews

If you listen carefully at *Made in Heaven!*, you can almost hear the crank turning. Not that it always turns, for much of the time it gets badly stuck, and once in a while the handle flies clean off.

But it's not Miss Wilde's fault if her new comedy doesn't function just like a well-behaved piece of machinery — she certainly didn't mean for anything human to get in the way.

On the other hand, the play she has cranked out is meant to *seem* extremely human — to make you nod approval, and smile assent, and roar with recognition at its picture of matrimonial griefs and its chronicle of the eternal war between the sexes. Wives in the audience are counted on to keep pinching their husbands' arms, and husbands to keep nudging their wives in the ribs. "Get it?" each slightly black-and-blue spouse is supposed to keep murmuring, between guffaws, to his mate.

Hence it seems rather wonderful that Miss Wilde should have written of matters so unarguably true and made them seem so decidedly unlikely. To be sure, her Elsa and Zachary Meredith, and the other married couples that flank them, do things that are recognizable enough; and, thanks to Miss Wilde's wisecracking abilities, sometimes say things that are briefly and broadly amusing. But the whole thing is done at the crudest and easiest level, with the dialogue directed less between characters than straight at the audience, and with Miss Wilde apparently always asking herself, "Will this get a laugh?" rather than, "Is this funny?" Nor is the plot any help. I have seldom found anyone straining harder to drive a happily disgruntled couple apart, sweating so hard to keep them apart, or wasting more time in bringing them together again. The poor plot coughs its way through two acts and then drops dead in the third.

Obviously, *Made in Heaven!* is just one more play that aims at being "popular entertainment," and there is no reason to single it out from its fellows for a special, and somewhat moral, whacking. But it's just because Miss Wilde has some wit in her, which she exploits without taste, and some sense of realism, which she smears with piffle, that one is genuinely irritated. You get the sense of stooping to conquer, you get the impression of something needlessly cheesy.

Donald Cook plays Zack Meredith in his familiar competent style, and there is an agreeable performance by Lawrence Fletcher. Carmen Mathews seems rather miscast as the wife, and the others in the company just string along. Mr. Goldwasser's sets are all very shiny and rather awful.

—Louis Kronenberger

1947

New York Theatre Critics' Review

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